

Delphi Bridge on U.S. 421
Over Deer Creek
Approximately .17 miles south of U.S. 25, DELPHI
Carroll County
Indiana

HAER NO. IN-91

HAER
IND
8-DELP,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Great Lakes System Support Office
1709 Jackson Street
Omaha Nebraska 68102

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: On U.S. 421 over Deer Creek
Approximately .17 miles south of U.S. 25
Delphi
Carroll County
Indiana
UTM: 16. 527700.4492789
QUAD: Delphi, Indiana

Date of Construction: 1935.

Engineer: Jesse V. Smythe

Present Owner: Indiana Department of Transportation

Present Use: Vehicular/Pedestrian Bridge.

Significance: The concrete bridge is located within and contributes to the National Register of Historic Places-eligible Delphi Historic District. The structure is a good example of early 20th century reinforced concrete bridge design and construction.

Project Information: The bridge is deteriorated, including concrete spalling, leakage at construction joints and cracking. It will be replaced as part of a larger improvement project for bridges in Carroll, White and Clinton counties.

The bridge was recorded by Camille B. Fife and Thomas W. Salmon II of The Westerly Group, Inc., RR 1 Box 141, Farmersburg IN 47850.

Description:

The Delphi Bridge on U.S. 421 is a cast concrete, two-arch bridge with a central pier mid-stream in Deer Creek. The bridge is characterized by several notable features, including a bull-nosed sheer-water pier, a solid balustrade decorated with inserted coffered, high aggregate concrete panels. The elliptical arches spring from a dado on the concrete pier to banks on the north and south. There are concrete brackets which support the balustrade and two pedestrian sidewalks above. Below these brackets, panels within the spandrels have been recessed. Much of this work and the pier is badly deteriorating.

The bridge is also interesting in that it has been placed into an existing rock-faced ashlar retaining wall running east and west from the north abutment. An active truck body works sits atop the retaining wall on the east side. The bridge is part of a complex which at one time featured a swimming pond, with concrete bathing steps, and dam.

The dam has been broached but the spirit of the bridge, the bathing area and an adjoining club building, with its fine trees remains active. There is a trail which travels east from U.S. 421 to a second, pedestrian bridge. The vistas from east and west of the bridge and the aforementioned amenities, are very pleasing for an urban site. Riley Park, upstream on the south side of Deer Creek, offers many recreational facilities and is within walking distance of the city and a local school.

Historical Information:

The bridge on U.S. 421 over Deer Creek is located in the historic Indiana town of Delphi, county seat of Carroll County. In an 1874 publication, the community was said to be "one of the best natural locations for business in the State of Indiana."¹ Early in its history, Delphi enjoyed a strategic place in the state's

¹ O. L. Baskin & Co, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Carroll County, Indiana*, Baskin & Co., Chicago, Illinois, 1874.

commercial development with the Wabash River to the north and a tributary, Deer Creek within its confines, just south of the center of town.

The City of Delphi was established in 1828 as the seat of Carroll County, shortly after the county was formed. The first settlement in the county was said to have occurred only four years before on land just one mile east of the present town site.² Delphi is located on a promontory of old limestone, northwest of Deer Creek. The land slopes gradually toward the bottomlands of the Wabash to the north and west - more dramatically toward the creek bed immediately south.

In the 1830s, construction on the Wabash and Erie Canal began in the northern part of Indiana. Delphi was an important port on the line, with a lock just west of the town center. Thus, from its earliest years, two water routes, the Wabash River and the canal, were important in its development. Farmers from sites south of Delphi brought their produce north for transport east along the canal.

An early plank road led from the center of town, south across the Deer Creek (at the present crossing) and then south to Frankfort, northwest of the state capital. A covered bridge, constructed between 1840 and 1850 and set upon rock-faced, coursed stone abutments spanned the creek. This structure is clearly visible in an old photograph which was printed in the local newspaper at the time of the dedication of the present bridge.³

By 1893, the wooden bridge had been replaced by an iron structure, which was present until 1935 when it was demolished for the present span. Rock-face, coursed stone abutments, highly visible on the north

² Ibid.

³ "The Old and the New", *The Delphi Citizen*, Thursday, June 25, 1936, p. 8.

side of the bridge, may date to either (or both) of the previous structures, since the concrete is an obvious later addition. The long transportation tradition which began with the plank road continues today in the active road known as U.S. 421/SR 39 which connects the towns of Delphi, Frankfort, and eventually the state capital, Indianapolis, to the south. Northward, the road eventually ends at Indiana's northern border, Lake Michigan, in the town of Michigan City.

The banks of Deer Creek, just north of the bridge, are filled with highly diverse examples of the richness of the town's past. On the north bank, behind the stone abutment and retaining wall, are located several commercial ventures. A carriage shop operated nearby and a wagon factory, a brewery operated south of the creek, and a large packing plant to the east of the bridge site. Today, a modern truck body works operates on the north bank.

Deer Creek itself gained fame in Indiana lore when Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley penned the opus, 'On the Banks O' Deer Crick', approximately one mile north of the bridge, along the south bank of this rural estuary. His appealing homely dialect was quoted in the local paper the day of the bridge's dedication:

'Well! I never seen the ocean ner
I never seen the sea--
On the banks o' Deer Creek's
grand enough for me!"⁴

Riley evidently spent considerable time in the bucolic small town which he called his, "favorite town in Indiana."⁵ Today, the south side of the bridge contains

⁴ "Deer Creek Bridge Dedication Today: 1000 to Hear Rite", *The Delphi Citizen*, July 2, 1936, p.1.

⁵ Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, *Carroll County Interim Report, Indiana Historic Sites & Structures Inventory*, Indianapolis, February 1980. p. 51.

a peaceful riverside park, complete with water's edge facilities, a picturesque foot bridge and statuesque trees. Riley would have been pleased.

Plans for the concrete bridge over Deer Creek were approved and signed on June 17, 1935 by Jesse V. Smythe, bridge engineer with the Bureau of Design for the State Highway Commission.⁶ Mr. Smythe had joined the Commission in 1934 and would continue his service with the agency until 1942 when he took a leave of absence to serve as a Captain, later Lieutenant Colonel with the Army Air Force during World War II. He distinguished himself during his four years of service by winning the Legion of Merit for service in the Aleutian Islands where he commanded the photo intelligence section of the 11th Air Force. He resumed his post as engineer of bridge design in 1946.⁷ He became the head of the bridge section of the State Highway Department before his retirement and died in Indianapolis at the age of 76 on March 12, 1972.⁸

When the stately concrete bridge was dedicated on July 2, 1936 at 7:30 PM in Delphi, Indiana, the town was in a celebratory mood. Held only two days before the fourth of July, the population was treated to an hour-long program of speeches and song. The local paper announced the program in advance: Presiding was local attorney, William C. Smith, who also provided a talk on the history of the bridge site. Two local pastors participated, one providing both a vocal solo and a reading of Riley's famous poem. Old citizens offered reminiscences, the Delphi Band played a concert of favorites, and their leader soloed with a

⁶ "Bridge Data Sheet", Indiana Department of Transportation Report, Project #NH-111-40CN, Structure #421-08-7939, Dated September 8, 1995, p.1.

⁷ "Bridge Designer Out of Army; on Job Again", *Indianapolis News*, February 25, 1946, Pt. 1, P. 3, Col. 5.

⁸ Obituary, *The Indianapolis News*, March 13, 1972.

popular rendition of "When You and I Were Young, Maggie."⁹ It was an evening to please the hearts of all loyal citizens.

Undoubtedly they were also pleased at the infusion of financial assistance which the construction project represented during those depression years. Simultaneous with the construction of the bridge had been the erection of a new viaduct, south of town in South Delphi which permitted the passage of North Street over the State Highway. The viaduct replaced an earlier structure built in 1908. Harold Tharp had been the contractor for both projects. Construction costs were \$40,000 for the bridge and \$38,000 for the viaduct.¹⁰

A program which was distributed at the ceremony credited the Indiana State Highway Commission, James D. Adams, Chairman, Evan B. Storenburg and John W. Wheeler. The State Engineer in charge was Ward W. Miller. It also contained photographs of the old covered bridge across Deer Creek taken many years before by the photographer, A. W. Wolever and of the newly-dedicated span, photographed by Robert Haynes. The last paragraph of the text, written by William C. Smith, summed up the local feeling: "These two beautiful structures, we dedicate to public use today, will stand for years, monuments to the engineering skill and workmanship of the State Highway Commission. They beautify our city and make more real our slogan ... 'Delphi, She's Beautiful. Look Her Over.'"¹¹

⁹ "Dedication of Bridge Over Deer Creek" *The Delphi Journal*, July 2, 1936, p. 1.

¹⁰ *The Delphi Citizen*, June 25, 1936, p. 8.

¹¹ "Program for the Dedication of the New Deer Creek Bridge and Viaduct", Thursday, July 2, 1936, Delphi, Carroll County. In the collection of the Carroll County Historical Society Museum. Mrs. Don R. Moore, Curator.

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